



Fact Sheet

INTERNATIONAL DAY IN SUPPORT OF VICTIMS OF TORTURE 26 JUNE 2005

"The International Day in Support of Victims of Torture is an occasion to reaffirm our commitment to eradicate torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, in whatever guise or manifestation they occur", says UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his message for this year's observance of the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. "It is an occasion to pause and remember torture victims who have not survived, to listen to the stories of those who have, and to support their quest for justice for torture victims and their families - including by supporting the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture."

On 26 June, the international community observes a special day to focus on helping torture victims and ending torture -- the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the International Day in its resolution 52/149 of 12 December 1997, with the aim of eliminating torture and ensuring the application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Each year, the Secretary-General issues a message on the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. The full text of this year's message is available on www.un.org/apps/press/latest/asp.

Torture is one of the most profound human rights abuses, taking a terrible toll on millions of individuals and their families. Rape, blows to the soles of the feet, suffocation in water, burns, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, shaking and beating are commonly used by torturers to break down an individual's personality. As terrible as the physical wounds are, the psychological and emotional scars are usually the most devastating and the most difficult to repair. Many torture survivors suffer recurring nightmares and flashbacks. They withdraw from family, school and work and feel a loss of trust.

Ms. Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, recently stated: "There are no circumstances, none, in which torture is ever permitted. Not in states of emergency, not in war. The international human rights instruments provide for that. What more is there? How many guidelines do we need? Let's go and enforce it."

UN efforts to eliminate torture

Since its creation, the United Nations has condemned torture and worked towards its eradication. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in its Article 5, proclaims that "no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment". Today, the fight against torture is proceeding on many fronts. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1984, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment obliges States to make torture a crime and to prosecute and punish those guilty of it. It notes explicitly that neither higher orders nor exceptional circumstances can justify torture.

As of 27 April 2005, 139 States have ratified the Convention. These States parties are required to report to the UN Committee against Torture, a human rights treaty body set up in 1987 to monitor compliance with the Convention and to assist States parties in implementing its provisions. For further information, please visit www.ohchr.org/english/law/cat.htm.

In 2002, the General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which when it enters into force, will allow visits by independent international and national bodies to places where persons are deprived of liberty. As of 27 April 2005, eight States have ratified the Optional Protocol (20 ratifications are necessary for the Protocol to enter into force). Further information is available on www.ohchr.org/english/law/cat/ccpr-one.htm.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines torture as a crime against humanity "when it is committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack", and it defines torture as a war crime when it is committed "as part of a plan or policy or as part of a large-scale commission of such crimes".

Education is another pillar of the campaign to eradicate torture. United Nations technical assistance programmes help countries to establish national infrastructures for the protection and promotion of human rights, and to train public officials -- such as police forces and judicial personnel -- with responsibility for the realization of human rights. In addition, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights works with various United Nations mechanisms, including the Committee against Torture, the Special Rapporteur on Torture, the Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture and the United Nations Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Programme. For further information on the work of the OHCHR, please visit www.ohchr.org/english/index.htm.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture plays a key role in the international fight against torture by responding to complaints from individuals and groups and reporting to the UN Commission on Human Rights. From 16 December 2003 to 30 November 2004, the Special Rapporteur sent 223 letters to 77 Governments. The Special Rapporteur also sent 330 urgent appeals to 72 Governments on behalf of individuals for whom fears had been expressed that they might be at risk of torture and other forms of ill-treatment. The current Special Rapporteur on torture is Mr. Manfred Nowak (Austria). The latest reports of the Special Rapporteur may be accessed at www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/2/chr.htm.

Aiding torture victims

In addition to preventive measures, the United Nations has taken action to come to the aid of torture victims. In 1981, the General Assembly set up the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Torture, which continues to assist victims and their families by providing support for psychological, medical, social, economic, legal and humanitarian assistance. The Fund is the main source of funding for medium to small scale projects assisting victims of torture worldwide. Applications for grants amounting to US\$13,000,000 were received for consideration by the Board of Trustees of the Voluntary Fund for 2004/2005. US\$6.7 million were recommended for 172 programmes submitted by non-governmental organizations in 61 countries.

UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Torture

Governments, non-governmental organizations and other private or public entities can contribute to the UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Torture. For additional information, please contact the Fund's secretariat c/o United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Trust Funds Unit/Support Services Branch, CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland. Telephone (41.22) 917.93.15, fax (41.22) 917.90.17, email: unvft@ohchr.org. Or visit www.ohchr.org/English/about/funds/torture/.

For further information about UN efforts to prevent torture, please visit the following Internet website: www.ohchr.org/english/issues/torture.

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